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Abstract

Derek Walcott, the Nobel Laureate for Literature, 1992, was born, along with his twin brother Roderick, on January 23, 1930, in St Lucia in the old British West Indies. His parents were Alix Walcott, a respected school teacher, and her husband Warwick Walcott, of the Public Works Department. Warwick died when the twins were one year old, leaving Alix the daunting task of bringing up the twins and their sister Pamela. Despite the early death of Warwick he, who had been himself a painter and producer of plays, was to have a great influence on the artistic career of Derek. Because I was one of the main readers on Henry Swanzy's BBC's Caribbean Voices I was fortunate to come into contact with Walcott's work as early as 1949, and I first met him in 1951 at the Colony Club, Jamaica. He was with an old school mate of mine, Tony Steer, who, Walcott tells me, later appointed himself a bishop of his own church somewhere in Central America.

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Derek Walcott – A Personal Memoir

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Because I was one of the main readers on Henry Swanzy's BBC's *Caribbean Voices* I was fortunate to come into contact with Walcott's work as early as 1949, and I first met him in 1951 at the Colony Club, Jamaica. He was with an old school mate of mine, Tony Steer, who, Walcott tells me, later appointed himself a bishop of his own church somewhere in Central America.

Walcott was then an undergraduate at the University College of the West Indies, Mona. He was reading (or as we would have said in those days of colonial innocence, studying) the old combined honours degree: English, French, Latin. I was still a lecturer at the London University Institute of Education, and had returned to Jamaica, where I had been born in 1920, partly to look at the new University College. Later, in 1953, when I joined UCWI, as one of the few West Indian members of staff, Walcott was still a student.

I can remember Derek's smile when, on that first meeting with Steer, I quoted the first of his verses which stuck in my mind: *...nursing neurosis like a potted plant...* He did not smile easily in the early days at UCWI, and alas, sometimes gave the impression that he was in fact nursing neurosis.

My recollection is that I had heard vaguely of Walcott in 1946 from James (Sonny) Rodway on the crowded SS Jamaica Producer which was taking a whole batch of us, from the Caribbean, to pursue university – mainly postgraduate – studies all over the U.K. Rodway was from a distinguished Guyanese family but he had moved to St Lucia in the colonial education service to be an inspector of schools. One of Walcott's earliest works is dedicated to him – because, says the inscription quoting Catullus, 'You did not take my poems to be mere mist' – *...namque tu solebas/ Meas esse aliquid putare nugas...*

Much to my surprise Rodway knew the work of George Campbell of Jamaica, whom he then – 1946 – considered to be the leading Caribbean poet. (This came out as we were discussing some poems I had recently published.) I was surprised because at the time I hardly knew of St Lucia (its capital, Castries, had been raided during the war and heavily shelled); I certainly did not know of its poets. And although George was the leading nationalist poet of Jamaica, and a protégé of Edna and Norman Manley, I might not have known much about his work except for the fact that we had been students together at the Jesuit High School, St George's College in Kingston. George's work was also well known to another St Lucian, the painter and amateur anthropologist, Harry Simmons. And through Harry, Walcott was more influenced by Campbell's work than he perhaps realised. This can be seen in Walcott's *Another Life* where Simmons reads to Walcott Campbell's well known poem *Holy*: 'Holy be the white head of a Negro...' and where in fact Walcott so took over the theme of 'Holy be...' that the subtitle of my forthcoming book on his poetry is 'from exorcism to benediction'. For his concerns moved from those of cursing the vile things of his early experience to that of blessing the good things. The theme of *Holy be* runs through the whole of *Another Life*.

One of the other bits of his verse which I could have quoted at him in the Colony Club was 'You in the castle of your skin/ I the swineherd...' The persona in that poem feels that he has been rejected by his 'Princess' because he is clearly too dark, and she is pictured as safe in her 'fine castle', looking down on him and banishing him to the pens of the swine, a mere swineherd. There is little doubt that in his early days Walcott was much concerned in his poetry with themes of colour, discrimination and rejection, of being on the periphery. He seemed also in his personal relations and *aura* to have been prickly, morose and deeply worried. The wife of a colonial official once said about him, as a young man, that she knew no one who so strongly gave the impression of being disturbed and bleak. When I relayed this remark to a scholar from Trinidad he said 'She ought to know all about that, and the reasons for it – is she not from St Lucia?'

One of his remarkable achievements – most suitable to a Nobel Laureate – has undoubtedly been his movement from exorcism to benediction. He had much to reject in the time and place of his birth, but he has been able to move from the necessary rejection of 'the works and pomps of Satan' to the acceptance of, and the building on, all that was positive: his great gifts, his family's nurture, the 'good colonial education' which he received, the care of such people as Harry Simmons and the Irish brother who introduced him to Joyce and Yeats and Irish ballads.

Few people could have moved as he did from his early feelings of rejection to his wonderful taking over, in *Another Life*, of Francois Villon's 'I have swallowed all my hates'.

From the culture of St Lucia into which Walcott was born another Nobel Laureate also came: the late Sir Arthur Lewis, the economist. And one of Walcott's close friends and colleagues of his early days, Dunstan St Omer, is an outstanding painter, as was Harry Simmons in a smaller fashion. This island country, of 180 square miles, also accounts for an outstanding musical genius, Luther Francois, and outstanding entrepreneurs such as the late Sir Garnett Gordon, and many writers. In fact the cultural life of the place, despite poverty and prejudice, is a cause for wonder.

The cultural factors which first would have made any gifted person such as Walcott uncomfortable, dissatisfied and rebellious, and which he was later, with the touch of a true alchemist, to transmute to gold, are alluded to by the shabine, the main character in, and narrator of Walcott's *The Schooner Flight*:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation...

Walcott's mother was his connection with the Dutch, through the tiny island of Sint Maartin. His father's father was from Warwickshire in England. Two of his grand parents were black; two white – an expression of the cultural mixture of his island home. St Lucia itself had been battled for by the French and English for some two centuries: in the days of sail it controlled a wind route direct to the Main. Fourteen times it changed hands between England and France. Just off its shores, at the battle of the Saintes (1793), the fate of France in North America and India was decided by Rodney's victory over De Grasse – this is one of the starting points of Walcott's remarkable *terza rima* novel/poem *Omeros*.

So while the population was genetically African with a fair sprinkling of Carib and European, the cultures which were brewing together were Trans-Atlantic African, French (Pre and Post-Revolutionary) British (mainly through schooling and the English language it taught), heavily Roman Catholic, with a small but staunch Methodist presence. Both Walcott and Lewis came from Methodist families. By the time Walcott was growing up, English was the language of the schools and civil service; French Creole the language of the countryside and the streets; French of the Creole families who had escaped from the Revolutionary islands, and a Creole of English was spreading. Of this *mélange de tous* your ethnic cleanser, white or black, Catholic or Protestant, Muslim or rationalist, would have despaired.

One of the marks of Walcott's greatness, it seems to me, is that while many of us would have done our best to deny the 'mixture' generated in our culture through history and European geopolitics, and a few of us would have merely accepted it, Walcott used it and the experience that it brought, to make poetry of the highest quality. In doing this he has also

enriched that language which first came from England – that glorious and growing language which so many, who should know better, are now trying to persuade us, especially in the 'United Kingdom', stopped developing, even perhaps died, with Shakespeare and the King James translation of the Bible! He has also clearly shown by his art how the influence of the languages brought by brutalised slaves from Africa has been giving birth to new extensions of language throughout the Caribbean.

But Walcott's greatness lies not only in his feeling for the whole of his spiritual/physical/intellectual environment, and his ability to work through all of it, but also in his dedication to work – the dictum of Horace's about using the *labor limae*, he took whole-heartedly to his poetry.

But poetry is neither mainly a matter of concerns or of hard work; it is hewn, or in a few cases comes as if by magic, from a particular nexus of language and music. It combines a creative insight into tradition with an ability to experiment, to extend the confines into other regions.

So one must refer – one has not space to do more than that – to Walcott's magical ability with language and his ability to handle many verse forms, and to extend them – whether sonnet or terza rima or quatrain. Note in *Tales of the Islands* his extension of the sonnet form and of end rhyme into internal patterns which create new richness in the use of assonance. From early on he revealed an ability to create meaning through the combination of varieties of not only registers but languages. In *Schooner Flight* Shabine, who is not only of mixed race and culture, but a Creole speaker, narrates the whole of the poem in an idiom not only suitable to creating verisimilitude but to communicating in a special way certain meanings not easily communicated in a monolingual display of 'the STANDARD LANGUAGE'.

In one of his early poems he refers to 'fishing the twilight for alternate voices his own voice'. And many a learned critic shouted *pastiche* as his youthful exuberance disclosed too easily his vast reading of both English and French poets. Soon he found his 'own voice'. But certainly that is always at most half the battle. He also had some thing to say – something meaningful, not only to Nazareth but to Rome, Nairobi and New York – even to London, which is always a bit narky about him – after all he has deserted not only the negative understatement London so loves but also the Empire, and lives half the year in AMERICA! (the other half he spends in the Caribbean). Further, his great friends tend to be foreigners who do not understand that the only done thing, in showing that one is really 'top drawer', is to pretend that one has nothing to say and is indeed rather boring!

In one sense his medium can be seen as flowing against his 'message', for while the former appears to grow more and more transparent, the latter never forgets, or attempts to hide, the fact that it comes from a complicated situation – a situation as multicultural and 'impure' as it is possible to imagine.

I have referred above, by implication, in quoting the fleeing Shabine, to the cultural variety of Trinidad, his native land. But Walcott's situation in the land of his birth was no less complicated: in fact Shabine is very nearly an *alter ego* for Walcott.

The St Lucia of Walcott's birth, and formative years, bears little relation to what many European and Eurocentric pundits seem to predicate for a viable polity, and which ethnic cleansing, and much of the seeking of roots, really advocates. Walcott was brought up as a strict Methodist in a country at least ninety percent Roman Catholic by profession. His mother was the staunch Methodist; his father an Anglican; his teachers at St Mary's were Roman Catholic laymen and Irish Brothers. One of the laymen who influenced him greatly through his Latin teaching was a Barbadian. The Irish Brothers were mostly rebels, and rather anti-British: one of these introduced Walcott to Joyce's *Ulysses* when that book was still banned in the United Kingdom.

But he was also introduced by the Brothers to Yeats as well as to the then literary canon for British secondary schools. So that in 1952, when at the University College of the West Indies reading English, Latin and French for an Honours Degree, Walcott could write Henry Swanzy of the BBC in the following manner about his youthful Twenty Five poems (published when he was nineteen, and recommended to Swanzy by Frank Collymore) and which we had used on the programme Caribbean Voices:

...when I wrote the poems I was deliberately modelling myself on some known works, I mean for the form of them. I had written much more original verse before this [Twenty Five Poems]. I scrapped about a hundred poems, this is no joke, to select the twenty five, and had gone through my Miltonic period, which usually afflicts all of us in the Fifth Form, sculptured some very intricate and (I thought) powerful fragments of Jacobean verse, but my discovery of the Love Song of Prufrock and the witty off-the-face style of Auden all opened a new world to me.

Nor are the complications – or riches; it depends on your point of view – of Walcott's early environment yet exhausted. Walcott's strict and loving mother, Alix, was not one for encouraging Creole in her household; and all forms of any thing that was not considered 'Standard English' were prohibited at school, despite the Irish presence. Yet there was no way in which Walcott and his twin brother could have existed in that society, even though they would not have been encouraged 'to mix', without that French Creole which was the *lingua franca* of St Lucia.

So one grew up speaking the 'King's English', much influenced by the King James Version, French Creole and a Creole of English, and with luck French. The colonial power was Britain; the Governors General or Lieutenant Governors were British; the law courts were British, but the Code Napoleon was the rule in those courts. Many of the British colonial court officials would not have known in practical terms what was the meaning of the geopolitical fact that by the time of the treaty of Versailles (1783) St

Lucia had swapped hands fourteen times between England and France. Nor had they perhaps even heard of the Battle of the Saintes (April 1782) which took place within gunshot noise of St Lucia in which Rodney defeated De Grasse, and in so doing kept the British in the Caribbean, in Canada and in India, at the expense of the French.

This battle, as I noted early on, is one of the 'starting points' of Walcott's latest and remarkable poetic work, *Omeros*. In this book (325 pages long) he extends his sympathies and concerns to the original populations of North America, to Polish refugees, to local fishermen and 'witch doctors', to all those who in the modern world have had to ask themselves over and over again *Where is home?* – a concern which Walcott developed quite early, starting with *Tales of the Islands*. And he does this in *Omeros* through verse that is often lyrical and is in the form of terza rima.

We who have often been tempted to despair as we survey our Caribbean homes, their violence, their exploitation, their falling for drugs, and we who know that mere survival is not enough – what is at stake is the quality of life however poverty stricken it might be – can only be grateful for Derek's great gifts, for his husbanding of them so diligently, for his parents and all others who cared and nurtured even in circumstances of alienation and what others might have thought of as 'deprivation', some far from their own 'homes'. And it is good to know that work of this kind, though its own reward, is not always ignored by those who have the wealth and power to notice it in a special way:

I sang our wide country, the Caribbean Sea
Who hated shoes, whose soles were as cracked as a stone,
who was gentle with ropes, who had one suit alone,

whom no man dared insult and who insulted no one,
whose grin was a white breaker cresting, but whose frown
was a growing thunderhead, whose fist of iron

would do me a greater honour if it held on
to my casket's oarlocks than mine lifting his own
when both anchors are lowered in the one island...

(*Omeros*, 1990, p. 320)

I was eighteen then, now I am forty-one,
I have had a serpent for companion,
I was a heart full of knives,
but, my son, my sun,

holy is Rampanalgas and its high-circling hawks,
holy are the rusted, tortured, rust-caked, blind almond trees,
your great-grandfathers, and your father's torturing limbs...

Holy were you, Margaret,
and holy our calm...

Anna, I wanted to grow white-haired
as the wave, with a wrinkled

brown rock's face, salted,
seamed, an old poet,
facing the wind

and nothing, which is,
the loud world in his mind.

(*Another Life*, Chap 22, V/VI; 1973)

No Florida loud with citron leaves
With crystal falls to heal this age
Shall calm the darkening fear that grieves
The loss of visionary rage.

Or if Time's fires seem to blight
The nature ripening into art,
Not the fierce noon or lampless night
Can quail the comprehending heart...

(*In a Green Night Cape*, 1962; first published, 1960, *New Statesman*)

Distinctions and awards. A selection:

The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry; The Arts Council of Wales Award for International Poetry; The Mac Arthur Award given to those considered to be 'geniuses' in certain fields.

Rockefeller Fellowship to study drama and stage techniques in New York; Walcott's plays have won 'Off Broadway' awards, and he has been commissioned on two occasions to write plays for The Royal Shakespeare Company of Great Britain, the latest being a version of the *Odyssey* which is now in production. This play is written in hexameters; most of his plays are in verse.

His most recent honour in Great Britain was to be made a Vice President of the Poetry Society for life. He is a Fellow of the American Society of the Arts.

Walcott's *Collected Poems* runs to 516 pages; and contains material from at least ten of his books of poetry. His dramatic work is as extensive, and at present he has one play in London, and two others to be staged soon, one in Birmingham, and one in Stratford on Avon.

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- Another Life* (1973)
- Sea Grapes* (1976)
- The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979)
- The Fortunate Traveler* (1981)
- Midsummer* (1984)
- Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (1986)
- The Arkansas Testament* (1987)
- Omeros* (1990)

PLAYS:

- Henri Christophe* (1951)
- The Sea at Dauphin* (1960)
- Six in the Rain* (1969)
- Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970)
- In a Fine Castle* (1972)
- Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (1972)
- The Charlatan* (1974)
- The Joker of Seville; O Babylon!* (1978)
- Remembrance; Pantomime* (1980)
- The Isle Is Full of Noises* (1982)
- The Last Carnival; Beef, No Chicken; A Branch of the Blue Nile* (1986)
- The Odyssey* (1992)

At the time of the Nobel award the New York Times published the above bibliography, but it really contains only the books published by his supportive New York publishers.

It does not mention his *In a Green Night* (Jonathan Cape, London 1962), nor the earlier *25 Poems* (Trinidad Guardian Commercial Printery, 1948), nor *Epitaph for the Young: xii Cantos* (Barbados Advocate, 1949).

The best bibliography of the earlier years is to be found in the excellent *A bibliography of published poems, 1944-1979*, by Irma E. Goldstraw (aka Billy Pilgrim; UWI St Augustine, Trinidad, 1979).

She points out that his first published poem appeared in *The Voice*, St Lucia in 1944. Derek was then fourteen years of age.